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APRIL 1976

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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*Bad pennies, they say, always turn up—but when they don't
it's sometimes necessary to go looking for them. . .*

NEXT IN LINE



Four of my cigarettes were missing.

Ordinarily I would not have noticed the loss at all. However, I had been attempting to give up smoking, and, as a starter, had rationed myself to one pack a day.

This morning I had broken open a new pack and placed the twenty cigarettes inside my silver case. I had then gone downstairs and breakfasted.

I then retired to the library, lighted my first cigarette of the day, and read my daily two pages of *The Mill on the Floss*. As a test of determination, I am determined to finish that damn book if it kills me. At present I have reached page 171.

I had finished the cigarette and the two pages, and then crossed the hall to the drawing room where I worked the crossword puzzle in yesterday's newspaper, and kept one eye on the grandfather clock, waiting for 9:30 and time for my second cigarette.

At the half-hour chime, I reached for my cigarette case and realized that I must have left it back in the library. I found the cigarette case on the table beside the easy chair I'd occupied earlier. When I opened the case, I discovered that instead of nineteen cigarettes waiting to be smoked, there were now only fifteen.

My first thought had been of Edwards. Had he taken the cigarettes? But then I remembered that Edwards did not smoke.

What about Henrietta and Cyrus? No, immediately after breakfast, they had driven off together in Cyrus's car to see that attorney in Chicago again about breaking the will.

Except for Edwards, I was the only other person in this huge house at the moment.

I rubbed my jaw.

While I had been seated in the drawing room occupied with the crossword puzzle, I had been facing the open doorway. I had had a clear view of the closed library door across the hall. I was positive that if anyone had entered the library, the movement would have caught my eye. But there had been none.

Was it possible that someone had entered the library through one of the windows and stolen my cigarettes?

Absurd as the sole motive for breaking and entering, of course; however, taking the cigarettes might simply have been a reflex action on the part of the burglar who had larger things on his mind.

I examined the high windows bordering the north and west sides of the room. Every one of them was securely bolted from the inside.

On the other hand, had one of them been open, and had the burglar bolted it *after* him when he entered the room?

In that case, he must still be in this very room, since I would surely have noticed if he had left the library.

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been a resident of O'Reilly Oaks no more than two weeks.
I armed myself with one of the fireplace pokers and proceeded to search the large room.

I found no one.

I lit my 9:30 cigarette.

The thief had to be Edwards. He was the only other person in this house. A true burglar would have pocketed the entire case. But only four cigarettes were missing, very likely because Edwards did not believe that I would notice their disappearance.

Was Edwards one of those souls who convince themselves that they are not really smokers if they do not actually buy their cigarettes? Begging or stealing was another matter.

The loss of the cigarettes in themselves was trivial. What intrigued me was how Edwards got into the library without my seeing him and how he managed to leave.

I could think of only one possibility. Ridiculously gothic, and yet in these old houses. . .

I went about the room pressing knobs, protuberances, and carved wooden grapes in search of the device which activated the secret passageway that must be the answer to the mystery.

I had no success.

I pulled the bell rope vigorously.

When Edwards entered the library—by legitimate means—I said, "Edwards, I understand that you do not smoke."

"That's true, sir."

Edwards was tall, in his fifties, and he had served in this house all his life, as had his father and his grandfather.

"Edwards," I said, "has this house ever had any ghosts wandering about the corridors at night? Or possibly even during the day?"

His eyes flickered. "What kind of ghosts, sir?"

"The usual kind," I said. "Headless ghosts, wailing ghosts, ghosts rattling chains, ghosts who smoke cigarettes?"

He thought about that. "In a house this size and age, sir, every creak of a floorboard can rouse the imagination. But I assure you that there are no ghosts in this house." He cleared his throat. "Have you heard. . . or seen. . . anything, sir?"

I smiled enigmatically. "How old is this house?"

"General Horatio Bolivar O'Reilly declared it complete in 1842, sir."

"When General Horatio Bolivar O'Reilly built this place, did he whimsically include a few secret passages? I understand such things were popular at the time."

Edwards shifted slightly. "I wouldn't know, sir."

It appeared that further questioning on the existence of the secret passageway—at this time, at least—would be futile. And in the matter of the disappearing cigarettes, I decided that a warning—of sorts—might be sufficient.

I elaborately studied the contents of my cigarette case. "Hm. I could have sworn that I smoked only two cigarettes so far today. And yet now I have only fourteen left. From now on I intend to keep an exact count of my cigarettes, Edwards. I am trying to give up smoking, you know, and I'm rationing myself to exactly twenty cigarettes a day."

"Yes, sir," Edwards said. "I believe I did hear you mention something to that effect several days ago."

O'Reilly Oaks consists of some forty-five rooms, give or take a few. The present acreage of the estate is one hundred and eighty, most of which is either wooded or rented to neighboring farmers. Only the four or five acres immediately about the house are landscaped.

General Horatio Bolivar O'Reilly, tavern keeper and victualer to the army, attained his rank when he raised a battalion of militia during the Black Hawk War. In the course of the campaign, his unit lost over three hundred men—two hundred of them through desertion, one hundred by way of various fevers, and eight through acute alcoholism. No Indian was ever sighted.

Returning from the war a somewhat richer man, General O'Reilly selected this site some fifteen miles from the town of Green River Falls, which in those days had a population of some three thousand souls. Today the population is still under four thousand.

In the days when servants were plentiful and cheap, a veritable army of them attended O'Reilly Oaks. But time, the rising cost of labor, and attrition on the O'Reilly capital took its toll, so that at the death, earlier this year, of Terrence O'Reilly—General O'Reilly's great-great-grandson, the only occupants of the house were Terrence himself and his man of all parts, Edwards.

When Terrence expired, only three direct, though remote, descendants of General O'Reilly still remained in this world—Cyrus O'Reilly, a Certified Public Accountant in Chicago; Henrietta O'Reilly, who

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presided over a pool of typists at a mail-order firm in Boston, and myself, Wilbur O'Reilly, who am employed by the Gailliard Steamship Lines, which is based in San Francisco.

None of the three of us had ever met before and we were only vaguely aware of each other's existence. We gathered in the library at O'Reilly Oaks where Amos Keller, attorney and executor of Terrence O'Reilly's estate, read us the will.

It provided that O'Reilly Oaks remain in a trust under Keller's supervision. Any direct descendent of General O'Reilly was welcome to use the house and grounds for his home as long as he wished. The trust also established a fund to cover the real estate taxes and minimal maintenance of the building and grounds.

It further provided that Edwards had the right to remain at O'Reilly Oaks for as long as he chose and that he be paid his regularly monthly salary for as long as he lived there.

At the death of the last O'Reilly, the entire estate was to be liquidated and the money realized be distributed to a number of charities.

When Keller finished reading, there was a long minute of silence.

Ienrietta, a robust grim-visaged woman, spoke up first. "Let me get this straight. You mean to say that none of us gets a piece of the estate?"

"I'm afraid not," Keller said. "Though, as mentioned, any or all of you may regard O'Reilly Oaks as your home for as long as you live. I am authorized to provide each of you with a monthly allotment to cover food, clothing, and incidentals."

Cyrus O'Reilly was a small man, balding, and wore rimless glasses. "In terms of cash, how much is the estate worth?"

Keller shrugged. "That is difficult to say. There are so many variables. It all depends upon the buyer, the market, the time, and so forth."

"Has it ever been put up for sale?" Cyrus asked.

"No."

"No offer was ever made?"

"Well, yes," Keller admitted. "A group of businessmen did approach Terrence some years ago. They made him a rather handsome offer, but he turned them down."

Cyrus pursued the point. "Why would a group of businessmen want O'Reilly Oaks? I'd think that in this day and age, a house this size

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would be a drug on the market."

"Possibly," Heller said. "But they intended to turn the estate into a golf course. They seemed to believe that the main building would make an ideal clubhouse."

"How much did they offer?" Henrietta asked.

"I don't know exactly," Keller said. "But I understand it was in the neighborhood of a million." He looked over his glasses. "Do any of you intend making O'Reilly Oaks your home?"

Cyrus studied his fingernails. "I think I'll give it a try."

I smiled. "Frankly, it sounds ideal to me."

The three of us—Henrietta, Cyrus, and I—spent the next few days wandering independently about the house and grounds, assessing the situation.

I found the building quite to my taste. The furniture was a bit dated, but in excellent condition, though a bit dusty on the second and third floors. I selected a second-floor suite which caught the morning sun, did a bit of tidying, and moved in.

At breakfast at the end of the week, Henrietta surveyed the old-fashioned room without approval. "I'd prefer a smaller, newer place. Especially one that I could call my own."

Cyrus crunched into his toast. "I have an office and a clientele in Chicago. I don't see how I can seriously consider giving that up for subsistence living."

Edwards had done the cooking and now served.

"Edwards," I said, "the scrambled eggs were delicious. Did I detect paprika?"

"Yes, sir. Mild paprika for interesting color and vitamin C."

"What about you, Wilbur?" Cyrus demanded. "I understand that you have a responsible position for some steamship line. Do you intend to give that up for free room and board?"

I sipped coffee. "I have enough time in with my company to qualify for a half-pay pension. I believe the time has come for me to retire."

After my graduation from college some twenty years ago, I went to sea. Not out of a spirit of adventure, but for the solid economic reason that it was the only job I could find at the time.

I signed on as an assistant to the purser of the *Polylandia* of the Gailiard Line. The *Polylandia*, a new luxury liner based at San Francisco, made most of the ports of the Far East. As of my present leave, I had

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spent all of my working life on the *Polylandia* in the purser's department.

Henrietta put down her knife and fork. "I'm positive we can break the will."

"Oh?" I said. "On what grounds?"

"I found out that Terrence lived here for the last fifteen years as a recluse and everybody knows that recluses aren't normal. He couldn't have been in his right mind when he made out that will. We three are the only blood relatives he had in the world and by all rights we should inherit what he left and split it three ways."

Cyrus concurred emphatically. "We simply can't waste our lives sitting here in this monstrous house. There's a lawyer I know in Chicago who specializes in this type of thing. Will-breaking, you know. He's expensive, but we'll split his fee among the three of us and still have plenty left."

I declined to join them. "Personally, I prefer the situation just as it is. I am by nature sedentary. In my entire service on the *Polylandia*, I went ashore less than a dozen times and then only for souvenir shopping. I even had my appendix removed while aboard the *Polylandia*."

Cyrus crumpled his napkin. "Well, I'm driving to Chicago to see that lawyer. If either of you want to come along, I've got room in my car."

When Cyrus left, Henrietta rode beside him.

I spent the morning evaluating the kitchen-garden area and the greenhouse. The latter had a few broken panes but otherwise seemed in serviceable condition.

I returned to the house and found Edwards in the kitchen preparing lunch. "Edwards," I said, "do we have anything like a Rototiller on the premises?"

"Yes, sir. All of the gardening machinery and implements are in the shed next to the greenhouse. Do you intend to garden?"

"Yes. For twenty years I have been priming myself with garden magazines. It is now time to give it all a practical try."

Edwards trimmed some scallions. "The late Terrence O'Reilly was quite a gardener himself. He leaned towards vegetables on the premise that if you couldn't eat it, it wasn't worth growing, though he did have a soft spot for iris, moss rose, and heart's ease."

"I am rather inclined that way myself," I said. "I understand that

Uncle Terrence was a recluse."

"Not precisely, sir. He did prefer his own company, but he left the grounds now and then, principally for the monthly meeting of the Green River Falls Garden Club. Local gardeners get together on the second Wednesday of every month at the public library and I understand that new members are welcome."

"I never met Uncle Terrence in the flesh," I said, "though I do vaguely remember sending him some duty Christmas cards as a boy. He never married, did he?"

"He did, sir. Mrs. O'Reilly died thirty years ago."

"They had no children?"

"They had a son, sir. Robert."

"Dead, I suppose—or else Terrence would probably have left him the estate."

"Yes, sir. Dead. These last fifteen years."

"Then he died fairly young? An accident?"

"Yes, sir. I suppose you could call it that."

"Edwards," I said, "I have the distinct suspicion that there is a family skeleton involved here. What about Robert?"

"He was killed when his automobile plunged through a bridge railing and into the Mississippi River."

"Speeding? A few drinks under his belt?"

"No liquor was involved, sir. But he was speeding."

"Edwards," I said, "I am still pulling teeth. Why was he speeding?"

"Well, sir, he was speeding because the police were pursuing him. He had just escaped from the state prison."

"Why was he in prison?"

Edwards sighed. "Robert was a quiet sort of person, but with a strong sense of justice. A straight A student at the university. Or nearly so. In the final semester of his senior year, he received a B in ethics instead of the A he felt he honestly deserved. He lost his head and shot his professor."

I felt a twinge of sympathy. The only blot on my own academic career had been a C in physical education, a subject which has no place in a true university.

Edwards sliced tomatoes. "Robert was sentenced to life imprisonment, but he tired of life in confinement and managed to escape. For a short while, anyway."

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"And now he is dead and buried?"

"Not exactly, sir. Dead, yes. But his body was never recovered from the river."

Henrietta and Cyrus returned in time for dinner that evening.

Cyrus rubbed his hands. "Well, Wilbur, we've seen McCardle. He's the lawyer I told you about. He's positive that we can break the will. He suggests that we do a bit of research and gather evidence about Uncle Terrence. When a man is a recluse for fifteen years, he's bound to develop a few idiosyncracies—items which, with the proper handling, we can build into a strong case showing that Uncle Terrence's mind wasn't exactly what it should have been."

He turned to Edwards, who was serving dessert. "Edwards, you were with Uncle Terrence all your life, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you must remember certain incidents, certain circumstances, when you might have called his behavior a little peculiar?"

"No, sir. I do not."

Cyrus smiled thinly. "You have a bad memory—is that it?"

"No, sir," Edwards said, "I have a very good memory." He left the room with the empty tray.

"That was clumsy of you, Cyrus," Henrietta said. "After all, Edwards stands to lose something when we break the will. If we want his cooperation, we will probably have to make some kind of a deal with him."

Cyrus nodded. "Well, Wilbur, are you with us?"

"How much does McCardle expect for his legal services?" I asked.

"Twenty-five percent of the estate," Cyrus said.

I smiled. "So each of us, including our attorney, would get one-fourth of what might or might not amount to a million dollars? Minus, of course, whatever it takes to get Edwards to cooperate and minus the inheritance taxes, which I understand are horrendous these days?" I shook my head. "No, I don't consider it at all worth contesting the will. Suppose I did manage to clear one hundred and fifty thousand? If I chose to spend it gloriously, it would be gone before very long and I would be left with nothing. Or even if I invested it wisely, how much could I expect as a return? Twelve thousand a year?" I helped myself to another slice of cottage cheese torte. "No, at this moment I am living in greater comfort and security than I could possibly expect with

NEXT IN LINE

one hundred and fifty thousand. I am well fed, live in ease, get to pull the bell rope when so inclined, and how could I possibly afford a servant and superb cook such as Edwards on twelve thousand dollars a year?"

"I'd prefer one hundred and fifty thousand in cold hard cash," Henrietta said firmly.

Cyrus nodded. "The hell with security."

During the next week—interspersed with unsuccessful efforts to get Edwards to cooperate with them—Henrietta and Cyrus traveled to Chicago twice more for conferences with the lawyer.

On the evening of the day Edwards had filched my cigarettes, I sought him out. "Does that station wagon in the garage belong to you or was it Uncle Terrence's?"

"It was your uncle's, sir."

"I don't suppose there would be any objection if I borrow the wagon tonight. This is the second Wednesday of the month, isn't it? I thought I'd drop in at the garden club meeting."

"I'm certain you will enjoy it, sir. Your uncle did." He found the keys to the station wagon and handed them to me.

When I returned from Green River Falls that night after ten o'clock, I found flashing red lights and several State Patrol cars parked in the driveway in front of O'Reilly Oaks.

When I entered the house, a solid, uniformed man appeared in the hallway. "Mr. Wilbur O'Reilly?"

"Yes. What is this all about?"

"I am Lieutenant Stafford," he said. "State Patrol. I would like to ask you a few questions."

We joined Henrietta and Edwards in the drawing room.

Stafford studied me. "Your cousin Cyrus O'Reilly was found shot to death beside the road to Green River Falls about a half mile from here. Can you account for your time this evening?"

"Of course," I said. "I attended a meeting of the Green River Falls Garden Club. The subject was roses. Now what is this again about Cyrus?"

"His body was discovered in front of his automobile parked on the shoulder of the road at approximately eight-thirty this evening. We are fairly certain that he must have been killed within minutes of that time

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pull because the road is well traveled and his body lay in the beam of his headlights."

I rubbed my chin. "Cyrus probably made the mistake of picking up a hitchhiker."

"Possibly," Stafford said. "However, in cases like this hitchhikers almost invariably take the car along with them. Also Cyrus O'Reilly's wallet was intact in his pocket and contained several hundred dollars. I doubt that any hitchhiker-murderer would have overlooked something like that."

"Undoubtedly the hitchhiker panicked and fled after the murder," I said. "What was Cyrus doing out this evening anyway?"

"No one seems to know," Stafford said. "He left without telling anyone and no one saw him leave. What time did you leave here this evening?"

"About seven-thirty."

"How many people were at this garden club meeting?"

"About twenty-five, possibly thirty. The meeting broke up at about a quarter to ten."

"These people would be able to verify that you were there the entire evening?"

"I was a stranger there. It was my first meeting. Probably no one even noticed me except the secretary when I signed up as a new member at the end of the meeting."

Stafford shook his head. "When you are a stranger in a small town, everybody notices you. So you were there from the time the meeting started until nearly ten?"

I coughed. "Well, . . . actually I arrived at the meeting a bit late."

"How late?"

I smiled quickly. "There seems to be a fork in the road to Green River Falls and I took the wrong turn. I traveled some distance before I realized that I was on the wrong road and turned back. I arrived at the Green River Falls library at about nine."

Henrietta smiled.

I glared at her. "And where were you at the time Cyrus met his death?"

"In my bedroom reading a book."

"Ha," I said. "And is there anyone who can verify that?"

"Of course not," she said coldly.

"And you, Edwards," I said. "Where were you at eight-thirty?"

He seemed surprised at the question. "I was in the kitchen preparing marinade for sauterbraten."

Stafford's eyes went to Henrietta and me. "I understand that the two of you and Cyrus O'Reilly inherited Terrence O'Reilly's estate. Is the probate complete? What I means is, will the estate now be divided between the two of you instead of three?"

"I'm afraid your information about the estate is wrong," I said. "We did not inherit Terrence O'Reilly's estate. According to the terms of the will, we are merely allowed to remain here as guests for as long as we choose. We do not ourselves own one inch of the property."

Henrietta hastily backed me up. "Not one inch. So you see, officer, there isn't any possible reason in the world why either one of us might have wanted Cyrus dead. We have absolutely nothing to gain by his death."

"Lieutenant," I said, "I believe that there is a nitrate test or something of that nature for detecting gun-powder grains on the hands of persons who have recently fired guns? That ought to settle this matter once and for all."

Stafford nodded. "Our technician is waiting in the next room. But murderers are getting more sophisticated these days. Especially where premeditation might be involved. They usually take precautions like wearing gloves or some type of wrapper around their hands and arms when they fire a gun. I won't be surprised if I don't find a thing."

He didn't.

Stafford continued to question Henrietta, Edwards, and me until eleven-thirty before giving up for the evening.

The next morning I met Henrietta at breakfast. "Well, Wilbur, now that Cyrus isn't with us any more, we stand to get larger shares of the estate, don't we?" she asked, pouring coffee.

"Henrietta, I still haven't the slightest intention of contesting the will."

She smiled thinly. "Of course not, Wilbur. And neither have I. At least not right now. We'll wait a while, won't we? Six months? A year? After all, even though the police apparently can't prove a thing about Cyrus's death, it isn't wise to appear so greedy." The smile disappeared. "It's got to be either you or me, and it certainly isn't me."

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"You understand perfectly well what I mean, Wilbur. One of us murdered Cyrus and I know it isn't me. You're a lot deeper and cleverer than I thought. That innocent expression doesn't fool me for a moment. I intend to keep an eye on you and I shall take precautions."

"Precautions? What precautions?"

"I shall send a sealed letter to a friend of mine with instructions that it is not to be opened unless I meet death under mysterious circumstances."

"Henrietta, I simply don't follow you."

She smiled grimly. "In my letter, I shall accuse you of murdering Cyrus."

I stared at her coldly. "You have absolutely no proof."

"Of course I haven't. If I had, I would most certainly have turned it over to the police. However, in my letter I shall say that both you and I conspired to murder Cyrus for bigger shares in the estate, and that now I suspect that you have plans to kill me too and take over everything. I think that would make the police sit up and take notice if something should happen to me, don't you, Wilbur? The confession of one of two conspirators would make quite a bit of trouble for you."

"Henrietta," I said, "has it ever occurred to you that there is a third person in this house who might want to see Cyrus dead?"

"Edwards?"

"Of course. After all, if you and Cyrus had broken the will, he would stand to lose his home and job."

"But we offered to cut him in."

"Yes, but your offer may not have been enough. Or he may prefer the status quo. He might regard O'Reilly Oaks as his home as much as Terrence O'Reilly did—certainly more than you or I do."

I finished my coffee. "I am now going to send a sealed letter to a friend in which I state flatly that the three of us—Edwards, you, and I—conspired to murder Cyrus for fun and profit and that I now strongly suspect that the two of you are about to murder me too." I smiled. "I will also state that you and Edwards have been having an outrageously erotic love affair."

She flushed. "Me? With a servant?"

"My dear Henrietta," I said. "It's been done before."

As it turned out, neither of us ever sent those letters.

I went to the library, lit my first cigarette of the day, and picked up *The Mill on the Floss*.

When I dispatched the obligatory two pages, I searched for yesterday's newspaper and the crossword puzzle.

Where had I left the paper? Oh, yes—in the sunny alcove at the first-floor landing.

I left the room, found the newspaper, and paused there to read an article I'd missed yesterday. When I finished, I went back down the stairs to the library.

I had finished approximately half the crossword puzzle when the grandfather clock across the hall chimed the half hour.

Time for my second cigarette. I reached for my case on the table beside me and opened it.

Five of my cigarettes were missing. When I had left the room I had not taken the case with me and evidently while I was gone. . .

I went to the bell rope and pulled vigorously.

Edwards appeared. "Yes, sir?"

"Edwards," I said, "I am missing five cigarettes."

He frowned thoughtfully.

"Edwards," I said. "Do you agree that there are only three people in this house?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Good. I know positively that I did not smoke those five cigarettes, and I also know that the very odor of tobacco makes Henrietta ill. What does that leave us with, Edwards?"

He evaded my eyes. "I don't know, sir."

"It leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that the person who stole those cigarettes is you, Edwards."

Edwards rubbed his neck. "Yes, sir. I confess. I took the cigarettes."

I regarded him sternly. "Edwards, aren't you ashamed of yourself? After all, your salary is quite generous. I should think that you would be able to buy your cigarettes, it shouldn't be necessary to steal them. Do you have an explanation?"

He hung his head. "Sir, when I stopped smoking, I swore never to buy another cigarette. However. . ."

"Ah," I said. "You left yourself a loophole. You did not forswear to beg or steal cigarettes, did you?"

He looked away. "I think steal is too harsh a word, sir. Filch,

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"Edwards," I said, "above and beyond the filching, there is one other thing about the incident which bothers me. How the devil did you get into the library? There must be some secret passage. When I left this room, I walked up to the alcove at the first landing to retrieve the paper. I was up there for perhaps two or three minutes, reading, but I faced the open library door down below me. While I did not actually stare at it, it was within the periphery of my attention. I am certain that I would have caught the movement of anyone entering the library."

Edwards chewed his lips for a moment. "As you went up the stairs to the landing, sir, your back was toward the library door. I took that moment to slip into the library."

"Very well," I said. "Then how did you get out of the library? You surely wouldn't have had enough time to enter it, steal the cigarettes, and leave during the relatively short time my back was turned."

Edwards rubbed his jaw. "I hid behind the door, sir. As you re-entered the library and walked toward your chair, your back was again turned. I darted out of the door."

I sighed. "Then there is no secret passage?"

"No, sir. No secret passage."

"Edwards," I said, "I admire your timing, but this filching of cigarettes has got to stop."

"Yes, sir," Edwards said firmly. "I'll see that it doesn't happen again."

The weeks passed rather quietly and the second Wednesday of another month appeared.

I borrowed the keys to the station wagon from Edwards.

"The garden club again, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "This month we have a vegetable gardener as guest speaker. Hungarian wax peppers are his specialty."

"I'm certain it will be interesting, sir. I do hope you don't take the wrong fork in the road again, sir."

"Not very likely. I know my way around by now."

At slightly after nine o'clock that evening, as I sat in the audience in the lecture room of the Green River Falls library, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

NEXT IN LINE

It was Lieutenant Stafford of the State Patrol accompanied by another uniformed officer. Stafford beckoned and I followed him outside, acutely aware that I was the cynosure of all eyes.

On the steps outside the building, he said, "Were you in there all this evening?"

"Since eight o'clock. Why?"

"Would the people in there be willing to swear that you were?"

"You'll have to ask them. But I assure you that I did not leave the room. As a matter of fact, I occupied the seat next to the mayor. His field is geraniums. Frankly, I've never cared about geraniums. All the ones I've seen appear to be perpetually dusty. What is this all about?"

"Your cousin Henrietta was found shot to death beside her car on the road to Green River Falls by a passing motorist at eight-thirty."

I frowned. "Henrietta shot beside the road? The same as Cyrus?"

He nodded. "Same road, same place, same time. Probably the same gun. We'll establish that later. Now let's go back inside."

I balked. "You mean you're going back in there and break up the meeting just to ask if anybody remembers me?"

"Exactly."

We marched back inside, where Lieutenant Stafford mounted the podium and took command of the meeting.

It was most embarrassing, but he found a number of people, including the mayor, who were willing to swear that I had been in my seat in the audience when the meeting began at eight and had not left it until called outside by Stafford. I had the feeling that my new notoriety would either get me expelled from the club or nominated for its presidency at the next election.

Stafford took me to State Patrol headquarters, where I was given another nitrate test, which, of course, proved to be negative.

Nevertheless, I was then taken into a small interrogation room for further questioning.

"Frankly," I said, "outside of some psycho lurking beside the roadway and killing without reason, I think your only bet as the killer is Edwards."

"Edwards? That butler, or whatever?"

"Why not?" I said. "Where was he at the time Henrietta was murdered?"

"In the kitchen grinding dry bread for wiener schnitzel."

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Weiner schnitzel? I considered that tenderly. Usually it also meant cucumber slices in thick cream.

"What possible reason would Edwards have to kill your cousins?" Stafford asked.

"They were planning to break Uncle Terrence's will and convert the estate into cash. Without my cooperation, I assure you. Nevertheless, if they had succeeded, it would have meant that Edwards would lose his job and domicile."

"You think he'd kill two people just to keep his job?"

"If one also considers room and board, I would say that we are talking about a package deal which exceeds fifteen thousand dollars a year. Giving Edwards a conservative additional twenty years of life, that could amount to something over three hundred thousand dollars. Surely something worth killing for."

Stafford did not seem impressed with a motive stretching over twenty years. He regarded me thoughtfully. "Now that your cousins are dead, that leaves only you. The last of the O'Reillys. Is that the way you planned it all along? Eliminate them first and then step up and break the will? There's no point in dividing the spoils three ways if you can hog it all."

I shed the accusation with dignity. "I have a perfect alibi."

He grunted. "I always distrust perfect alibis and I always break them. Do you have a twin brother by any chance?"

I smiled. "I am one of a kind. I would not have it any other way."

It was after midnight before Stafford released me and had me driven back to my car.

In the station wagon, I hesitated.

I most certainly did not murder either Cyrus or Henrietta, though, frankly, I did not mourn their passing.

But that left only Edwards. He had to be the murderer. After all, who else was there? I did not really put much stock in the roadside-psychotic theory.

But if Edwards was the murderer, was it safe for me to return to O'Reilly Oaks?

I pondered that.

Edwards had killed Henrietta and Cyrus because they were intent on breaking the will. But I had no such intention. Besides, I was, after all, the last of the O'Reillys. If anything happened to me, the estate

would be liquidated, leaving Edwards homeless and without a job.

No, it might be a bit sticky living in the same house with a murderer, but my life was his life. If he harmed me, he would be cutting his own throat, so to speak. I should be perfectly safe at O'Reilly Oaks.

In time Stafford would undoubtedly gather enough evidence to arrest Edwards, but until then there was no point in my moving to some wretched motel. I drove back to O'Reilly Oaks and had a good night's sleep.

In the morning, after showering and dressing, I went to the bureau drawer where I kept my cigarettes.

I frowned as I looked down at the opened carton. I had purchased it yesterday and removed one pack. There should now be nine packs left. But there were only six.

Damn Edwards. First four cigarettes. Then five. And now three whole packs. And after he had firmly promised that he would stop. . .

I stared down at the cigarettes for perhaps a full minute.

Of course, I thought. Of course. That would explain everything. I filled my case and went downstairs.

I waited in the breakfast room until Edwards appeared.

"Edwards," I said, "I have been putting two and two together. Rationally it would appear that we two are the only people in the world who have motives for the deaths of both Henrietta and Cyrus."

"It appears so, sir."

"However, Edwards, I know that I did not kill either Henrietta or Cyrus. And I have the strange suspicion that neither did you. And neither, Edwards, do I now believe that you stole those cigarettes. Any of them."

Edwards coughed slightly.

I smiled. "I put this to you, Edwards. When Robert O'Reilly's automobile plunged over that Mississippi River bridge, he did not drown, but managed to crawl out of the water and make his way back home. And once here, he concealed himself somewhere in this house and has been hiding here ever since."

Edwards avoided my eyes.

"Edwards," I said, "he must have needed the assistance and connivance of another party or parties to survive here. After all, he had to be provided with food, drink, and whatever." I smiled again. "Edwards, why don't you just supply him with cigarettes too? Why does he

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Edwards sighed heavily. "Actually Robert was a nonsmoker until recently. But he has begun to acquire the habit."

I helped myself to the platter of browned sausages and delicately fried potatoes. "I assume that Robert killed Cyrus and Henrietta because if they had managed to break the will, he would have lost his sanctuary?"

"Yes, sir. The house would have been sold and the new owner would in time have become aware of Robert's existence. So Robert forced both of your cousins to drive to the spot where their bodies were found, shot them, and then walked back across the fields to the house."

Edwards poured coffee into my cup. "What do you intend to do now, sir?"

"I will have to inform the police, of course, and have them root out Robert."

"Sir, do you enjoy living in this house?"

"Certainly."

"Sir, Robert O'Reilly is the son of Terrence O'Reilly. As such, he has a perfectly legitimate and primary claim to his father's estate. He could go to court and easily break the will and its provisions for your occupancy here."

"But Robert is a murderer and a murderer cannot legally profit from his murders."

"True, sir. But Robert did not murder his father, and the date of his father's natural death is the point from which he would lay claim to the estate. As for your cousins, they did not own any part of the estate nor have a natural claim to it greater than Robert's. In other words, he may have murdered them, but it was not to gain control of the estate. He felt he already had that legally, whenever he chose to make himself known."

Edwards returned the coffeepot to its trivet. "Besides, sir, are you quite positive that the police could successfully prove that Robert murdered your cousins?"

"Well. . . no. But still, Robert is an acknowledged murderer. There is that matter of the ethics professor. Shouldn't he be returned to prison for that?"

"Possibly, sir. However, if you were responsible for sending him

NEXT IN LINE

back, he might be inclined to a bit of vindictiveness and pursue his claim to the estate. He might be a felon, sir, but he would become a rich felon and your landlord. Undoubtedly he would evict you and perhaps even charge you room and board for the time you have spent here."

I sipped my coffee slowly while Edwards waited.

"Edwards," I said, "suppose Robert takes it into his head to murder me too?"

"Sir," Edwards said earnestly, "when the last O'Reilly dies—which for all practical purposes means you—the estate will be liquidated. Robert might forestall that by emerging from his hiding place and laying claim to the estate, but that would mean he would be sent back to prison. That is the very last thing in the world he wants. He would not dream of harming you, sir. I'm sure he wishes you a long life."

I sighed. "Edwards, there is a secret passage into the library, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir. From inside the library it is revealed by pressing the posterior of the cherub blowing the trumpet on the wainscoting to the right of the fireplace."

"And the passage leads to where?"

"A bedroom on the third floor."

"Is that where Robert keeps himself?"

"No, sir. His quarters are behind false walls."

I quickly held up a hand. "Never mind. The less I know about his exact whereabouts, the better. And, Edwards, perhaps it might also be wiser if Robert did not know that I am aware of his existence."

"I understand, sir."

After breakfast, I retired to the library. I lit a cigarette and picked up *The Mill on the Floss*.

Was Robert watching me at this very moment? There obviously had to be some type of peephole. Was he waiting for me to leave my cigarette case behind again? But why should he? After all, he had those three packs he'd taken from my bureau drawer. At this moment he was more than likely in his hiding place contentedly puffing tobacco.

I put down the book, rose, and examined the wainscoting. I found the cherub with the worn posterior.

Gingerly I pressed it.

The wainscoting slid noiselessly back, revealing an opening some-

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what narrower and shorter than a normal doorway.

I hesitated at the darkness within, but then pulled out my cigarette lighter. Using its flickering light, I stepped cautiously into the opening.

I noticed a small knob just inside. Evidently it opened and closed the passage from the inside.

I left the passage door open and slowly made my way up the narrow stone stairs. There was the smell of dampness and mold, but there were no cobwebs. After all, they couldn't exist long if Robert kept tramping up and down all the time.

I ascended past what I estimated to be the second floor and continued upward until I faced a blank wooden wall.

I found a small knob similar to the one downstairs and turned it until the panel in front of me slid to one side. Whatever one could say about Robert, he certainly kept the mechanism of these doors well oiled.

I entered a small bedroom stale with the smell of disuse. Very likely long ago it had been occupied by one of the maids.

Footmarks, grimed from the passageway, faded to the hallway door.

In the hall they seemed to disappear entirely—however, when I got down on my hands and knees I could just barely make them out again. I trailed them to a doorway down the hall.

Was this Robert's hiding place? Not exactly, I supposed. Edwards had mentioned that Robert's haven was concealed behind a false wall, though probably this door was one way of getting to that false wall.

I hesitated between caution and curiosity and then edged the door open slightly. The medium-sized room appeared to be well lighted and it was empty of human life.

I stepped quietly inside and glanced about.

Where might this walled-off compartment be? Not that I had any intention of disturbing Robert. I simply wanted to know where it could be found.

Certainly not on the east and north sides of the room. They were thoroughly windowed. And not the south either. That bordered the corridor.

I studied the plastered west wall. There had to be some indication of the secret entrance, but there seemed to be none. Not even a hairline crack.

I opened the doors of a free-standing wardrobe and found neatly hung clothes.

But of course! This must be Edwards' room. I had never been inside it before, but now I recognized some of his clothes.

I should have realized at once that this room was lived in. Not a mote of dust anywhere. A clean-smelling comfortable room that I myself might occupy, except that I would add ashtrays.

My eyes went to the wastebasket. It contained a discarded magazine and. . .

I peered closer and lifted the periodical.

There—amid various debris—lay three unopened packs of cigarettes. My brand.

I thoughtfully returned to the wardrobe and examined the soles of Edwards' shoes. Yes, one pair of them bore traces of the unmistakable grime of the secret passageway.

Discarded cigarettes? Grime on the bottoms of Edwards' shoes? A smooth plastered wall that showed absolutely no signs of any entrance to a hideaway. A *supposed* hideaway?

My mouth dropped.

I had been flimflammed. Yes, that was the only word for it. Flimflammed.

Robert was unequivocally dead. He died when his automobile went off that bridge—body recovered or not. He was not lurking in the walls of this house nor had he stolen a single one of my cigarettes.

Edwards had cleverly reanimated him solely for my benefit.

Why?

I saw it all now.

With the deaths of Henrietta and Cyrus, I became the sole surviving O'Reilly and, as such, had to be preserved.

I had declared that I had no intention of challenging Uncle Terrence's will, yet there ever remained the danger to Edwards that someday in the future I might change my mind. After all, a million-dollar estate could be a constant temptation, especially now that I would have to share it with no one.

No, Edwards had to meet that hanging threat by creating, or recreating, Robert.

If Robert existed—or at least if I believed that he did—it was pointless for me to ever consider contesting the will. Robert had a prior claim and would step forward if I tried.

Yes, Edwards had been clever, but the charade was over with now

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and I would tell him so. It would undoubtedly destroy his sense of security, but the truth must out.

I stalked downstairs and found Edwards in the kitchen doing the breakfast dishes.

He wiped his hands and turned. "Yes, sir?"

Edwards had been born in this house, as had his father, and his grandfather. He belonged here as much as any O'Reilly. He loved it, he served it, he killed to protect it.

I rubbed my jaw. He had also been so considerate as to commit the murders at a time when he thought I would have a perfect alibi—though, of course, he could not have anticipated that I would take the wrong turn in the road on the night Cyrus met his death.

Edwards waited.

I cleared my throat. "Edwards, about this business of Robert filching my cigarettes. Perhaps you'd better see to it that he is regularly supplied. At least a pack a day."

He nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir. I'll put Robert's cigarettes on the master shopping list immediately."

The wiener schnitzel that evening was absolutely delicious.

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